

## 2-1-1 offers hope and help

### Oregon's network provides a lifeline of social services for the struggling

For the once-comfortable people left poor and desperate during this recession, 2-1-1 could be a magic number, connecting them with food boxes, foreclosure counseling and homeless shelters.

But many who've never had to seek assistance before aren't aware of the phone help line.

The local nonprofit branch of 2-1-1, which has networks across the nation, has three big needs: a higher profile, more money and better resources to offer a rapidly growing number of callers. To that end, state and federal efforts seek to expand 2-1-1info's hours and reach. The call center serves Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, Crook, Deschutes and Jefferson counties, plus southwest Washington.

Without more money, the service faces a quandary: "We want more people to know about us," said outreach manager Jen Matheson, but "we're not able to answer all the calls that come in."

Calls have jumped 22 percent, from 12,621 in January 2008 to 15,379 this January.

But a third of calls go unanswered by the 10 to 12 specialists who work the busy winter season. That's partly because calls take much longer these days, leaving many others on hold while specialists explain available services to first-time callers.

Some callers wait "until it's so dire that by the time they get services it's more costly," said call specialist Jenny Dodd, recalling an unemployed, uninsured man who waited five days to seek care for a broken leg.

A 2-1-1 call is "much more than a directory assistance call," said Jeri Shumate, executive director of 211info, whose local call center sits in a carpeted, tennis court-sized room in a downtown Portland high-rise.

The murmurs rising above its 15 cubicles hint at the call specialists' triple role as operator, counselor and investigator:

"So you don't have any income at all right now?"

### FACTBOX

What is 2-1-1? The 2-1-1 call center serving Portland's metro area is a clearinghouse for information on food banks, clothing closets, shelters and rent and utility assistance; health insurance programs, Medicaid and Medicare, community health clinics, mental health crisis services, and drug and alcohol intervention; job training; and child care, after-school programs and other family resources.

Information is also at [www.211info.org](http://www.211info.org).

"Let's get him to a clinic where he can get that prescription."

"I'm hearing that you're feeling really demoralized and you're in a lot of physical pain."

"OK, so there's enough food in the house?"

Another barrier to callers is the center's hours: 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., weekdays only. There are 10 to 20 messages waiting each morning.

In winter, the city of Portland contracts with 2-1-1 to answer housing-related calls from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on weekends and through 10 p.m. weekdays. It used to be open for all business on weekends until funding cuts in 2007. Shumate hopes for more money to expand hours.

The annual budget is \$650,000, including \$300,000 from United Way, which founded the local service.

Washington County, where 2-1-1 awareness is considered particularly low because phone providers there were slow to "turn on" the number, has given \$100,000 a year since 2004, when local service began. The county accounted for 18 percent of the 90,488 calls answered last year.

The city of Portland and Multnomah County combined to give \$95,800 this fiscal year, Shumate said. In 2008, 63 percent of calls came from Multnomah County. Portland also pays \$103,000 for 2-1-1 to manage and direct people to its Housing Connections Web site.

Another \$62,000 comes from Clark and three other southwest Washington counties, which make up 10 percent of 2-1-1 calls. Central Oregon, which publicly launched its 2-1-1 service Wednesday, gives \$63,000.

Clackamas County operates its own 2-1-1 call center from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Portland's center takes calls outside those hours.

Shumate was in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday to lobby for a 2-1-1 bill that Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., agreed to co-sponsor.

But there's an ironic downside to getting money for expansion, Matheson said: "We wouldn't want to undercut other agencies getting dollars for services."

The same recession that is sparking more calls for help threatens the underfunded programs on the 2-1-1 resource list.

Washington County's Community Action, for instance, got 1,131 rent assistance requests in January, compared with 583 a year earlier. The program typically has enough money to help 40 to 50 households a month.

Meanwhile, 2-1-1 specialists do what they can, gratified when they can help and hoping word of the helpline spreads. One sent trucker John Petersen to the Bible Way Fellowship shelter in Hillsboro. Petersen lost his apartment in September, after a layoff and a hospital stay. Until then, he said, "I didn't even know 2-1-1 existed."